

# OVER Revisited

## OVER 再び

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**Abstract:** A cognitive linguistic analysis of the English preposition *over* is presented. It is meant to be systematic and comprehensive. It is systematic in that the various seemingly disparate senses of *over* are made to follow naturally from the single static core schema proposed in the present paper.

**keywords:** over, preposition, cognitive linguistics, core meaning

### 1. Introduction

Almost all English prepositions in their core meanings are concerned with spatial locations. They specify the location of the TR (trajector) with respect to the location of the LM (landmark). For example, a sentence with the schema ‘TR *in* LM’ represents a situation in which the TR occupies the space defined by the LM. As I demonstrate elsewhere, there are (at least) two ways of location specification. One is the commoner, in which the location of the TR is defined in relation to that of the LM, like *in*, *on*, *near* and others. The other specifies the location of the TR in a larger context which contains both the TR and the LM, like *at*, *to*, *from* and *via*. The former I call Relative Locational Prepositions, and the latter Absolute Locational Prepositions. Now, which type is the preposition *over*? My answer is that *over* is a relative locational preposition with the core meaning shown as in (1) :

(1)

TR

LM

*Over* represents in its core meaning a situation in which (a) the TR is located upward with respect to the LM, and (2) the TR is not in touch with the LM. We can see this schema in sentences like those in (2). (The examples unquoted in this paper are all from E-DIC.)

- (2) a. He held the sample high over his head. (*Deception Point*)  
b. The clock over the clerks' desk used to run for weeks without winding.  
c. A jetliner with 120 passengers is reported to have been skyjacked over the island this afternoon.

Note that these sentences remain acceptable and retain almost the same meaning if *above* is substituted for *over*. They simply represent situations in which the TR is upward with respect to the LM, a meaning shared with *above*.

The following examples seem to contain more content than just spatial relations.

- (3) a. I cooked a sweet potato over a wood fire and ate it.  
b. “Bacon, toasted on a green willow switch over red coals, ought to put broiled lobsters out of business,” said Vuyning. (O’Henry)

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The sentences in (3) describe situations in which the TRs are affected by the LMs, readings made available through *over*'s core meaning of the TR being situated upward with respect to the LM. So conceived, it seems that the sentences in (3) have developed the meaning of cooking rather than the mere spatial configuration of being upward.

In any case, *over* expresses a purely spatial relation between the TR and the LM in its core. It is sometimes claimed (for example, in Tyler and Evans (2003)) that *over*, in contradistinction to *above*, has some non-spatial, or functional, meaning in addition to the spatial meaning. But this claim seems doubtful in view of the examples in (4).

- (4) a. She has a mole over her left eye.  
 b. That night Dicky sat by the window of the room over his shop. (O'Henry)  
 c. Over the front door was carved the words: 'The World's University; Peters & Tucker, Patrons and Proprietors.'

There is no possibility of the TR coming down to the LM in the course of time.

It is also often claimed that *over* requires that the TR be directly over the LM. But the following example runs counter to it.

- (5) The Rembrandt is diagonally over the Reubens. (Cresswell,1978)

It is true that the TR of *over* is directly above the LM in many cases, but in the presence of a specification to the contrary, it can be otherwise.

## 2. Extended meanings

### 2.1 Reinterpretation of Physical Scenes

Imagine a situation in which a number of people are quarreling about something. (6) is one such example.

- (6) Down in the hotel office three or four of the laborers were growling and swearing over a belated game of checkers.

The use of *over* in (6) is licensed because it meets the core schema proposed in (1), with the laborers as the TR and the checkerboard (game) as the LM. Similarly with the following examples.

- (7) a. They fought like cats and dogs over the money.  
 b. Those brothers are forever crossing swords over money matters.  
 c. Countries used to go to war over the most trivial of things.  
 d. The struggle between the two factions over control of the company has developed into an all-out war.

The examples in (7) describe situations in which there is some fight, in which the disagreeing parties are (conceptualized to be) situated over the LM, and, therefore, meet the core schema in (1).

The next set of examples of *over* are somewhat different from (7).

- (8) a. She showed Father Abram the letter over which she had been weeping.  
 b. Whenever he meets a pretty girl, he starts drooling over her.

In (8a) we can imagine a typical situation in which she was weeping with the letter under her. Thus it meets the schematic requirement of *over*. (8b) is obviously based on the typical situation involving drooping, like the one in which you have something to eat under and in front of you, thus meeting the schema of *over*. It appears that these concrete examples are generalized and extended to include more abstract situations of certain activities and emotions, as shown amply in (9) below.

- (9) a. For him to make such a fuss over something like this shows how young he is.  
 b. He must be sulking over the way everybody made fun of him the other day.  
 c. This Requiem is said to have been composed in mourning over a king's death  
 d. The boss is at his wit's end over what to do.

All of these sentences mean what they do by metaphorically extending situations in which some activity is done over the LM.

The following type of examples are amenable to the same analysis.

- (10) a. I was talking to Sara only the other morning over coffee.  
 b. We discussed the problem over a bottle last night.  
 c. Particle accelerator? Langdon was vaguely familiar with the term. He had first heard it over dinner with some colleagues at Dunster House in Cambridge. (*Angels and Demons*)

These sentences meet the schema (1) perfectly because they express situations in which two parties do something with the LM situated in between and under them.

## 2.2 *Over* of Priority

The schema (1) expresses a relative locational relation between the TR and the LM in which the TR is located higher than the LM. This configuration is metaphorically extended to express priority/value, since, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe, priority/value can be expressed in terms of height. Thus, consider (11).

- (11) a. I value my family over my job.  
 b. There are times when public welfare takes precedence over individual rights.  
 c. The environment should have priority over economic development.  
 d. The woman in the street often votes for males over female candidates.

In these sentences, the TR is valued higher than the LM, which is expressed metaphorically by the image of the former being situated higher than the latter.

## 2.3 *Over* of Excess

It is common knowledge that quantity can be expressed in terms of a vertical scale, with higher corresponding to a larger quantity and *lower* to a smaller quantity. Since *over* has the TR situated higher than the LM, it has the potential to express the idea of excess if the LM is interpreted as a container and the TR as the substance that fills it. In the examples in (12), we have a variety of realizations of excess.

- (12) a. That guy's working overtime again today.  
 b. This package is over the size limit.  
 c. I was ripped off by my dentist. He charged more than a hundred dollars over his estimate.  
 d. I've worked for over an hour on it.

## 2.4 *Over* of Superiority

From the fact that the TR of *over* stands higher than the LM derives the metaphorical interpretation that the TR is superior to, and dominates the LM.

- (13) a. Mary tries to lord it over us just because she's got more money than we have.  
 b. If you think they've released their reign over science, ask yourself why half the schools in your country are not allowed to teach evolution. (*Angels and Demons*)  
 c. The man who rules over the bosses of all the territories is called "the godfather" by the Mafia.  
 d. I don't believe in the power of mind over matter. It's not scientific.  
 e. Her knowledge of my past has given her a hold over me.

The following example is also one of superiority: it describes a situation in which the guardian angel watches from a higher, dominant position.

- (14) Your guardian angel must have been watching over you.

The examples in (15) represent another case of superiority.

- (15) a. ABC Corporation gained the edge over its rivals with its new manufacturing technology.  
 b. We gained an advantage over our rivals by arriving a day early.  
 c. I'm afraid I've let Tanaka get the upper hand over me for the position of section chief.

We have seen a variety of meanings of *over* which have derived from the static core meaning of *over*. In the

following sections, we will see those meanings which seem to have derived from the extended dynamic meanings of *over*.

### 3. The TR Moving Over the LM

#### 3.1 The Moving TR

In the core meaning, the TR is statically situated over the LM. But obviously *over* has meanings in which the TR is in motion. If our claim that the core meaning of *over* is as depicted in (1), the meanings in which the TR is in motion are derived ones. This meaning extension is licensed because there are moments at which the configuration of the TR and LM match that in (1). Below are some examples of this type.

- (16) a. He took a whack at the ball and sent it over the left-field fence.  
 b. We fired over their heads, and then charged 'em with a yell, and they broke and ran. (O'Henry)  
 c. I tell you, I never saw the beat! A UFO flying right over my head!  
 d. When the pilot fainted, I reached over his shoulder and grabbed the joy stick.  
 e. Our television acts up every time an airplane flies over the neighborhood.

In the above examples, the TRs are concrete entities, but non-concrete or fictitious entities like sounds or lines of sight are also acceptable, as seen below.

- (17) a. The truck driver entered the roadside cafe and yelled to the waitress over the counter, "Fix me a plate of ham and hen fruit."  
 b. Tolland rose shakily to his knees and peered over the sled at the attackers. (*Deception Point*)  
 c. "Is that Ms. Vetra's gear?" he yelled to Kohler over the roar of the engines. (ibid.)  
 d. Bill glared at me over Jane's shoulder as if to say, "Two's company, three's a crowd. Get lost."

In these examples, the TR moves parallel to the LM, but it obviously does not have to. In the following examples, the TR moves in an arc over the LM.

- (18) a. The goat jumped over the fence and ran off.  
 b. He skipped over the puddles.

It is true that the fact that the TR moves in an arc in these examples has nothing to do with the preposition *over* itself, but I suggest that the arc-like movement has come to be part of the semantic structure of the preposition as it has been used in similar situations time and time again. More specifically, *over* has come to have the following meaning through these processes.

- (19) The TR gets beyond/over the LM.

Let us look at the sentences in (18). They not only state that the TR moved over the LM, but also mean that the TR has succeeded in getting beyond/over the LM. That this meaning is not merely an implicature is shown by the following sentences.

- (20) a. Wait till the coast is clear, then climb over the fence and run for the car.  
 b. When we saw enemy soldiers coming over the hill, we knew it was time to bug out.

While it may not be unlikely that the meaning of success in getting over the LM manifested by the sentences in (18) is derived through calculation on the basis of the meanings of the sentences in question and the core meaning of *over* in (1) plus world knowledge, that is not the case with the sentences in (20). The reason is that there is not a single phase of the whole process/event which matches the core meaning of *over*, because the schema (1) dictates that the TR and the LM be separated from each other while the sentences in (20) describe situations in which the TR and the LM are in touch all the way. But then, why are the examples like (20) acceptable at all? My answer is that it has to do with the possibility that the core meaning of *over* in (1) is extended to a new meaning of the TR successfully getting over the LM. In its core meaning, *over* does not allow the TR and the LM to be in touch, but in its extended meaning, it does not exclude that possibility since it focuses more on the getting-beyond/over aspect rather than the being-over aspect. That is, *over* in this extended meaning puts less importance on whether the TR and the LM are in

contact or not than on whether the TR manages to get beyond the LM or not. Below are more examples of this type.

- (21) a. What caused the accident? / An oncoming car crossed over the center line.  
 b. I made my way over the mountain in the dark.  
 c. After walking ten kilometers over the mountain, I was dead on my feet.  
 d. With rising trepidation, she stepped over the threshold. (Deception Point)  
 e. Leapfrog is a game which children play, in which a child bends over, while others jump over their back.

All of the examples in (21) describe situations in which the TR passed the LM, not caring about whether they were in contact during the processes.

The getting-beyond/over sense in turn is extended to another metaphorical sense, as in (22).

- (22) She got married over the opposition of her parents.

Now, we note that once *over* takes on the meaning of *getting-beyond/over*, it has changed qualitatively. The qualitative change can be evidenced by the existence of the following well-known type of examples.

- (23) a. Today's destination is just over that mountain.  
 b. The post office is over the hill. (=The post office is on the other side of the hill.) (Bennett, 1975)

These are what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call the *end-point focus* type of *over*. It is also well-known that prepositions of path/movement generally can express end-point focuses as well, as in (24) - (27).

- (24) a. When Galileo insisted that the earth revolved *around* the sun, everybody said that he was full of beans.  
 b. My office is just around the corner.  
 (25) a. The tunnel *through* which I had been running suddenly came to a dead end.  
 b. The border is just ahead *through* those trees.  
 (26) a. The cat ran *across* the table.  
 b. A Black Maria pulled up in front of a building *across* the street, and several policemen jumped out.  
 (27) a. Even if we succeed in getting the door open, we'll never get *past* the guard.  
 b. The post office is *past* the cinema (from here). (Bennett, 1975)

The following example presents stronger evidence to the same effect.

- (28) A car appeared from over the hill. (Bennett, 1975)

The underlined part clearly denotes an end-point-focus location since it is an argument of the preposition *from*, which denotes a source location.

When a preposition denotes motion, it can generally also be used to denote the location of a static object. For example, Dewell (2007) makes the following observation about the example (29).

- (29) There is a string around her finger.

“The TR can also be in an extended state that corresponds to the result of extending on the path, so that the path expression is now being used to describe an objectively static scene.” (Dewell, 2007) The example (29) could be interpreted in such a way that the present location of the string with respect to her finger resulted from the event of the leading part of the string hypothetically or subjectively moving around her finger. But such a possibility is hard to imagine for the following example.

- (30) a ring around her finger

Concerning (30), Dewell (ibid.) makes the following comment: “The construction does not necessarily imply that the extended TR ever actually followed an *around* path to reach its final position. All that matters is that a scan of its shape conforms to an *around* path.” Note that these observations can be made for prepositions of path in general, as seen in (31).

- (31) a. There's a wire through the tube.  
 b. There is a tree across the road.

The examples in (31) are both ambiguous. In one reading of (31a), for instance, it says that the wire is located at the other side of the tube, and in the other, the wire is situated in the tube, extending from one end to the other. These

observations apply to *over* as well.

- (32) a. A bridge will soon be built over the river here  
 b. There's a railroad bridge over the river.

These observations lead to the conclusion that *over*, with its static core meaning, has been extended to mean motion over something.

### 3.1 Getting Over → Coming to an End

Uses of end-point focus has been extended metaphorically to mean that some event has come to an end, as seen in (33).

- (33) a. My last exam is over.  
 b. The storm blew over quickly.  
 c. The horse crocked before the race was half over.

These examples describe situations in which some event has gotten over what it should be, that is, it has gotten to its termination.

### 3.2 The Reflexive TR

Lakoff (1987) points to the existence of what he calls the reflexive TR. Note first that in the usual cases, the TR and the LM are two different things, as seen in (34), for example.

- (34) a. John is out of the house.  
 b. The book is on the table.

But consider (35).

- (35) The honey spread out.

The expression (35) shows that the English language conceives of the idea of something spreading as its getting out of itself. In this conception, the TR and the LM are one and the same. These TR's are called reflexive TR's. Reflexive TR's are not rare in English. Some more examples are shown in (36).

- (36) a. The book fell apart.  
 b. The building caved in.  
 c. He turned around.

The sentences in (36) describe the motion of one TR, the TR moving in a certain way with itself as its LM.

Lakoff observes that *over* is one such preposition. Consider (37).

- (37) John jumped over the fence.

Note that (37) describes John's motion in an arc-like trajectory. If such an event recurs again and again, the preposition *over* will come to be associated with the situation in which the TR moves in the shape of an arc, in addition to the more basic situation of the TR getting over the LM. If this new situation "permeates" the meaning of *over*, it may give birth to a new use for the expression of the TR's circular motion, with a reflexive TR. Some of the examples are the following.

- (38) a. The fence fell over. (Lakoff, 1987)  
 b. John knocked the bottle over.  
 c. The old boat rolled over and sank like a stone.  
 d. Flip it over. (Deception Point)  
 e. Rachel turned the disk over so she could see the other side. (ibid.)

The examples in (38) describe circular motion, and the use for circular motion stems from the use for the TR's motion in an arc over the LM. This latter fact imposes a restriction on the interpretation of the type of circular motion for *over*. That is, *over's* circular motion must be vertical, not horizontal. In addition, it must not be a rotation around an axis, since the original motion has no rotational axis. When it is a rotation involving an axis, we have to use

*around* instead of *over* in accordance with the core meaning of *around*.

(39) The bicycle wheels were spinning around.

#### 4. The Covering Sense

When the TR happens to be larger than the LM, the former may “cover” the latter. This leads to the covering sense of *over*. As is the case with the “getting beyond/over” sense, the problem of whether the TR is in contact with the LM or not becomes less important and secondary. As a result, with the advent of this new sense, *over* allows the TR to be in contact with the LM. Lakoff (1987) observes that *over* in this sense has rotation versions, allowing the TR and the LM to be rotated. But we could interpret this observation in the same light as above. That is to say, when you want to describe situations in which the TR covers the LM, you would not care about what spatial relations they are in. For example, even if the LM is above the TR, the latter will be “over” the former as long as the TR is larger than the LM and you look at them from under, that is, as long as the TR covers the LM.

First, let us look at cases in which the TRs are 2-, or 3-dimensional objects, which are typical cases of the covering sense.

- (40) a. It'll be cold, so why don't you wear socks over your stockings?  
 b. The government has drawn a veil over its UFO investigations.  
 c. The first thing to do if you burn yourself is to run cold water over the burn.  
 d. The man was sprawled out all over the floor.

There are multiplex variants of it.

- (41) a. Oh, you're scattering food all over the place.  
 b. Wild flowers ran riot over the meadow.  
 c. Jimmy is a real litterbug. He leaves his things all over the house.

We see further extensions from the multiplex covering sense below.

- (42) a. She wanders all over the place  
 b. He traveled all over the world.  
 c. The rider gave full rein to his horse as it galloped over the plain.  
 d. When I was young, I thumbed rides all over the country.

In (42), a single TR entity moves around, resulting in effect in covering the whole area denoted by the LM. It is reasonable to regard them as special cases of multiplex covering.

The following sentences are of the same type as (42), differing from them only in that a single moving TR is the end point of a fictitious line emerging from the visual apparatus, as discussed by Talmy (Talmy, 2000).

- (43) a. We've looked all over the shop.  
 b. I searched all over the house.  
 c. He glanced over the documents.

Some evidence for the end point of an intangible line of sight moving about over the LM is the existence of the following kind of example.

- (44) I've tentatively finished the manuscript but I intend to go over it once more.

What we note in (44) is that the basically spatial verb *go* is used to describe a situation quite similar to the one described by *look/glance over*. If English speakers conceive the situations depicted in (43) as basically identical to the one depicted in (44), it then follows that one end point of an intangible line of sight moves around over the LM in (43), just like in (44).

We have seen various cases of the covering sense, with the TR a 2-, or 3-dimensional entity, a multiplex entity, or a single entity moving around. But there are cases which are not so clear-cut. Consider (45).

- (45) a. I ache all over.  
 b. You had better think over what you did.

If the use of *over* in (45a) is to be explained as a variant of the covering sense, it does not seem clear what exactly covers my whole body; is it like a 2-dimensional object, a 3-dimensional object, a multiplex entity, or a single ache moving around? In the case of (45b), is there evidence that something covers the LM? I believe there is. Note that there are such expressions as (46) in English.

- (46) a. I thought back to the day we first met.  
 b. I let my thoughts wander at random over the day's events.

Expressions like (46) clearly suggest that English speakers can conceptualize thinking as transpositional movement, since (46a) has *back* and *to* and (46b), *wander*. If so, when we *think over* something, we may have a single point (of focus of thinking) moving around over the LM.

It is interesting in this context to note that, in its covering sense, *over* can allow bizarre word order despite its status as a preposition. Before considering it, note that Bolinger (1971) proposes the following test to distinguish between prepositions and particles.

- (47) a. He looked up his friends.  
 b. He looked his friends up. (Bolinger, 1971)
- (48) a. He stood in the doorway.  
 b. \*He stood the doorway in. (ibid.)

As seen in (47)–(48), while particles permit the word order ‘V – NP – P,’ prepositions do not. But Bolinger also observes the existence of an area of doubt, as in (49).

- (49) I walked that hill all over from top to bottom without finding a trace of the ring I had lost. (ibid.)

According to Bolinger, this unusual word order is what remains of older English. It seems that it is allowed when *over* has the covering sense. Let us look at (50).

- (50) Before you sign up to a mobile phone plan ensure you read over the details carefully or have someone else look over it to ensure you are aware of your rights and responsibilities under the contract.  
 (<http://www.linguee.jp/>)

It is possible to replace the underlined part with (51).

- (51) …look it over…

The end point of the line of sight emitted from the eye moved around on the surface, a version of covering sense, as seen above. The following example is of the same type.

- (52) The Sunday editor glanced the item over and said … (O.Henry)

With this in mind, let us consider (53).

- (53) Let me think it over.

If the occurrence of *over* in (53) is the same as those in (51) and (52), it may be the case that an imaginary point (of mental focus) is moving ‘over’ the topic referred to. The following seems to be same phenomenon.

- (54) The family must talk the matter over and decide what is best for the children.

It follows on this line of reasoning that what is called the topic-indicating use of *over* in fact (at least in part) derives from the covering sense, with the movement of a point of focus covering the whole area referred to by the LM, a very interesting consequence worth pursuing further.

## 5. Conclusion

The present paper attempted to explicate how the legion of disparate but related meanings of the English preposition *over* derive from its core meaning. First, we proposed the schema (1) for the core meaning of *over*, in which the TR and the LM are spatially related, with the TR being statically situated higher with respect to the LM. The proposed core meaning enabled us to see how other meanings are derived. It was also observed that *over* has dynamic meanings. *Over* has also the covering sense, giving rise to various seemingly disparate senses through meaning extensions.

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